

Abstracts and summaries

Dear Sir—Like many others, I suppose, I have to look through the leading technical journals in electronics with the twofold object of gaining a general picture of progress therein and more detailed reading of subjects of particular interest to me.

It has become established practice in such journals to preface each article or paper with a summary of its contents. The object of these summaries, presumably, is

to provide quickly the general picture referred to above, and to indicate to each reader whether the paper is worth his going into in detail. 'The Journal digest' goes a stage further, presumably with the same general purpose.

For some time I have become growingly convinced that these summaries, abstracts, digests, etc. are not being written in the most helpful manner for achieving these objects. What led me to think along this line was the observation that almost invariably I break off from reading the abstract to read the introductory portion of the full paper.

What I want first of all is not a highly condensed summary of the whole subject-matter of the paper, but some account of why the work described was carried out, where it fits into the general scheme of things and what advantages arise from its

results. Only then—if at all—do I need a summary of the work described in the paper.

Without this background information the summary is difficult or impossible to grasp quickly, unless one has oneself been concerned closely with that kind of work. It takes much less time and effort to read the possibly larger number of words providing the background. The brevity of the summary is therefore illusory. The greater the condensation, the greater the time and effort needed to grasp it.

My point may be further emphasized by an imaginary example. According to present practice, the summary might begin:

An investigation to determine the optimum distribution of resistive material for setting up a uniform planar field of radiation in the band $0.6\mu\text{m}$ to $4\mu\text{m}$...

I suggest that the following would save a lot of time and effort:

Domestic electric toasters often fail to colour the bread uniformly. Improved arrangements of heater-elements for overcoming this difficulty have been successfully investigated. The results have been found to lead also to useful economies in the production of radiant space-heaters. . . .

The rapidly increasing problem of coping with the rising flood of technical literature is now generally recognized. Means enabling one to grasp within a few seconds the value to oneself of any paper seems to me to be the key to the situation, and one to which insufficient (or misdirected) thought has been given.—Yours faithfully,

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19th February 1963*